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SUBJECT: Another "success" for "democracy" in Vietnam

Ref: Hanoi 1116

1. (U) Vietnamese voters went to the polls on Sunday, April 25 to vote for People's Councils at the provincial, district, and local levels (reftel). According to a report from the Ministry of Internal Affairs carried by the CPV flagstaff newspaper "Nhan Dan" on April 27, overall turnout was an impressive (note -- and improbable -- end note) 99.7 pct of eligible voters. Three provinces -- Vinh Long, Dong Nai, and Thua-Thien Hue -- allegedly tied for best performance, with 99.9 pct turnout. All provinces claimed turnouts of at least 95 pct. Altogether, 51 million voters were said to have cast their polls to elect a total of 311,930 representatives at the three levels.

2. (U) As in National Assembly elections in 2002, local voting procedures demonstrated considerable flexibility, often with one member of a family able to cast all the family's ballots, contrary to election laws. There was informal competition among the sub-district and local offices at which the ballots were cast for which would reach 100 pct turnout soonest on voting day. Not only were the old-fashioned propaganda loudspeakers in each neighborhood blaring exhortations to vote (along with catchy songs about voting), but local officials in many cases went from door-to-door to urge people to show up. Some precinct officials also apparently picked up ballots in person from sick or otherwise infirm voters.

3. (U) By 10:00 a.m., many voting centers in Hanoi were devoid of voters, although the local officials and volunteers were required to remain on site until 7 p.m., when polls officially closed. Many of the workers were retired local officials and teachers, helped out by members of the Youth Federation in their distinctive blue shirts. National flags were flying throughout Hanoi as another indication of this "festive" day.

4. (U) The "Nhan Dan" article also boasted about the conditions of "stability and order" that existed at all polling stations, even in "so-called hotspots." It noted that voting in remote areas, including mountainous parts of the Central Highlands and the Spratly Islands troop deployments, began voting more than a week ago to overcome the problems of distance voting. Results are expected to be announced on April 27.

5. (U) Comment: As in the 2002 National Assembly elections, voter apathy appeared strong, despite the claimed high turnout. Voters appeared to understand the "duty" part of voting -- and probably worried about consequences of retribution from local officials if they failed to help their locality meet the high targets for turnout -- more than enjoyed their "right" to choose their local representatives. Judging from the resumes posted at each polling center, a very large number of the candidates were local officials from a government organ or mass organization, rather than truly independent candidates. (According to Voice of Vietnam, only 1,065 of the 484,189 candidates were independent candidates.) Embassy predicts a strong majority of victories among CPV-member candidates.

BURGHARDT